

Reconnecting with a Parent: A Thoughtful Guide for Adult Children

Rebuilding a connection with a parent after a period of estrangement can be daunting, emotional, and uncertain. But it can also be healing, grounding, and ultimately freeing. This guide is for adult children who are considering reconnecting with a parent they've been estranged from, whether the distance was due to conflict, trauma, misunderstanding, or the slow erosion of contact over time.

You don't need to aim for a perfect or close relationship. Sometimes, a basic reconnection fostering mutual respect, occasional communication, a willingness to not ghost each other, is enough. This guide encourages emotional maturity, personal responsibility, and care for your own wellbeing, while also respecting the reality that your parent may never fully understand your experience. That's okay. Reconnection isn't about re-writing the past, it's about shaping the future.

Before You Reach Out: Ground Yourself

1. Reconnecting takes courage, maturity, and emotional preparation.

This process may feel awkward, painful, or emotionally risky. Expect discomfort. Remind yourself that you can survive uncomfortable feelings. Holding a mature mindset, one that allows for imperfection, unpredictability, and vulnerability is critical. Don't go in expecting smoothness. Instead, hold the attitude: *this matters, so I won't give up easily*. Notice and name when you want to withdraw. That instinct may be old, but it can be paused and it will be a sense of your own power and strength.

Choose a time when you feel emotionally steady—not in crisis, not angry, not overly nostalgic.

Accept that your parent may not say or do what you want right away. Rebuilding trust is often slow and uneven, being able to be vulnerable takes courage and time.

Allow space for disagreement. Many people maintain relationships with colleagues or in-laws they disagree with—your parent doesn't need to be perfect for the relationship to exist.

Understand emotional maturity includes reciprocity, not perfection. Hope to be heard and expect to be challenged.

Maintain baseline decency—answer messages, acknowledge milestones, show up in small ways.

2. Be Ready for Discomfort, Not Perfection

Reconnection is rarely smooth, especially at the beginning. You'll likely feel awkward, vulnerable, and unsure, and that's okay. It takes real maturity to lean into something clumsy and emotionally complex instead of avoiding it. Be prepared for silences, missteps, or moments where old feelings flare up. Don't expect a neat resolution, expect a process. Adopt the mindset that giving up isn't an option just because it feels hard.

3. Don't Expect Agreement or a Shared Version of the Past

It's very likely that you and your parent remember things differently. Be prepared to hear things you don't agree with. This is normal. Memory is emotional, contextual, and subjective. When your parent says "It wasn't like that," instead of defending your version, try responding with: "That's how I remember it, but I can accept we experienced things differently." Relationships can rebuild even when stories don't align. You don't need full agreement to build a respectful relationship. It's not agreement that restores connection, it's acceptance. Practice seeing your parent as you would a colleague, neighbour, or friend: someone with a different worldview who you can still interact with meaningfully.

4. Practice Emotional Responsibility

Many estranged adults still carry the belief that parents must meet all their emotional needs. But reconnection calls for an adult-to-adult mindset. You don't need your parent to "fix" your past or fully understand your inner world to have a relationship with them now. Make space for moments where your parent may seem emotionally clumsy or unaware. You can protect yourself without disconnecting.

5. Stay steady when tempted to withdraw again.

Not all reconnections are smooth. If you find yourself wanting to retreat, try not to disappear completely. You can take space *without* ghosting. Answer messages briefly. Let them know you need a little time. This helps preserve the fragile threads of trust.

6. Model Repair and Boundaries: Apologize, Don't Demand, State your Expectations, (even if they are not met) and Expect Some Defensiveness

Many estranged parents are deeply hurt, sometimes ashamed, sometimes confused, often grieving. Whether or not they were responsible for the estrangement or any pain they have also caused you, their pain is real. And like anyone who feels wounded or misunderstood, they may lash out or act defensively, even if they care deeply. It often reflects unprocessed hurt, fear, or shame. It may also represent a particular view or an unconscious reenactment of their own personality and/or relationship challenges.

As the adult child, you can model what repair looks like. You might say something like, “*I know I haven’t handled everything well, and I’m sorry for that*” or, “*I understand you want to get things straight, but I’m not willing to have that conversation now. Let’s try to keep today about something positive*”. This isn’t about taking all the blame or being combative, it’s about being the kind of person who owns their part and shows emotional maturity, even if your parent doesn’t yet know how to do the same. Repair starts when one person stops keeping score.

This approach isn’t weak, it’s wise. It creates space for your parent to lower their defenses and maybe, in time, find their own courage to acknowledge the ways they hurt you too. They may or may not be able to offer a full apology — but modelling repair plants a seed. It shows that relationships can move forward even when the past is painful and unresolved.

It also strengthens you. Modelling repair without pleading, explaining, blaming, or demanding anything in return, helps build your own self-respect, deepens your capacity for compassion, and sets a powerful example for any future children, partners, or close relationships. In taking this path, you may be stepping into greater wisdom than your parent could access by demonstrating humility, and letting go of the need to be met with an apology in return. That is something to be proud of.

7. Stay Grounded in Respect and Reciprocity

You don’t have to become emotionally close or best friends with your parent. But treating them with the basic courtesy you’d give a neighbour or coworker is both fair and healing. Respond to texts, acknowledge milestones, and maintain contact even if limited. If it helps, see this as an investment in your own character and in future generations who are watching how you manage difficult relationships.

8. Let Your Healing Shape You, Not Harden You

I imagine, if you have gone “no-contact” with a parent, you may have experienced real hurt in your upbringing. But if you use that pain to justify ghosting, lashing out, or punishing others, you risk becoming the very thing that wounded you. Instead, let your healing be the foundation for compassion, boundaries with dignity, and a sense of peace that you carry forward, regardless of how your parent responds.

How to Start: Message Starters

Often, the hardest part is knowing how to begin. Reaching out after a long silence can feel awkward or risky — but small, thoughtful messages can gently reopen the door. Here are a few non-threatening ways to initiate contact through text, chat email or even on the phone:

“Hi Mum, I’ve been thinking about you lately and just wanted to see how you’re going.”

“Hey Dad, I’ve been wondering what it might take for us to reconnect. No pressure — I’m not trying to pretend nothing happened, I’d just like to check in now and then.”

“I don’t expect everything to be perfect between us, but I do miss being in touch.”

“Would you be open to a short chat sometime? I know it’s been hard, but I’d really like to try.”

“It feels a bit strange reaching out after so long, but I think it’s worth giving this a go.”

“Just wanted to say hi — no expectations, just extending a small olive branch.”

If you’re unsure how to word your message, you can even use a tool like AI to help. Try typing something like:

“I want to reconnect with [Mum/Dad/Parents] and I want to say this: ‘[your message]’. Help me get it right, please.”

If your parent has been sending kind messages (such as birthday wishes) that you haven’t replied to, these can offer a natural opening. A simple “thank you” can gently start a conversation. Perhaps a week later, you could follow up with a more personal message, or wait for an occasion such as a birthday, holiday, or Mother’s/Father’s Day to send a warm and respectful note of your own.

You might also consider posting something tangible — a book with a note saying, “This made me think of you,” or a photo of your children with a message like, “I’d love them to know their grandparents. What could we do to make that happen respectfully?”

As much as possible, avoid making first contact in a group setting where others may feel the need to “take sides.” If you’d feel more comfortable having someone with you during a meeting, choose someone who fully understands your intention and who can support calm, constructive connection — not conflict.

If It Doesn't Go Well

- **If your parent is angry:** See it as a sign of hurt, not hostility. Try: *"I hear that you're upset. I probably deserve some of that. I'm still hoping we can talk more sometime."*
- **If they refuse contact:** That may change. Keep the door open with respectful messages every so often. Silence doesn't mean your effort didn't matter.
- **If you disagree about the past:** You probably will. That's okay. Try: *"We might see things differently, but I'm more interested in how we treat each other now."*

If You Don't Get the Response You Hoped For:

Allow yourself to grieve what didn't happen — the apology you wished for, the connection you imagined, the openness you were ready to offer. Then gently remind yourself why you reached out in the first place: not to control the outcome, but to be the kind of person who chooses healing and integrity. This is about becoming someone who can treat even a parent who is mistaken, emotionally limited, affected by mental health challenges, or lacking in self-awareness — as still a human being. Maybe not a safe or easy one, but still deserving of basic respect and decency. You don't need to approve of everything they've done, but you can still model the dignity and compassion you wish they had shown you.

SUMMARY

Reconnection doesn't need to mean denying harm, forgetting pain, or becoming emotionally enmeshed. It simply means choosing dignity, respect, and a future that isn't dictated by the past. You can lead with maturity, even if your parent can't. You can break a cycle, even if they couldn't.

And you can do it without sacrificing your integrity or boundaries. Begin small. Stay kind. Stay open. And be proud of your courage to try.